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ABSTRACT

The reward-cost model of helping behavior in emergency situations suggests that the probability that an observer will help a victim depends, in part, on the relative strength of the rewards and costs of providing help. Factors that influence willingness to help in non-emergency situations were examined using descriptions of situations in which a person asked for different kinds of help. A sample of 132 college students indicated the amount of help they would provide in each situation and rated the perceived costs and rewards of providing help. Helping in the non-emergency situations was negatively related to the costs of helping and positively related to the rewards for helping and to personality differences in altruism, while controlling for social desirability bias in each case. In addition, highly altruistic persons viewed identical situations as more rewarding and less costly than persons low in altruism. The findings suggest that individual differences in helping behavior may reflect variations in the perception of social situations. (Author/JAC)

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Helping in Non-Emergency Situations: Costs, Rewards, and the Altruistic Personality

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Helping in Non-Emergency Situations:

Costs, Rewards, and the Altruistic Personality

The reward-cost model of helping behavior in emergency situations (Piliavin & Piliavin, 1972) suggests that the probability that an observer will provide help to a victim, in part, depends upon the relative strength of the rewards and costs for providing help. For example, if the costs for providing help are low and the rewards are high, direct help would be expected in the situation. On the other hand, if the costs are high and the rewards are low, the observer would be expected to escape from the situation rather than provide help. Although this model explicitly refers to responses in emergency situations, helping in non-emergency situations also may be influenced by the perceived rewards and costs of helping (e.g., Weyant, 1978). In the present study, it was predicted that high rewards would lead to more helping than low rewards and that high costs would lead to less helping than low costs in five non-emergency situations.

According to Rushton (1981), an altruistic person is someone who is likely to engage in a wide variety of helpful acts and, as a result of this behavior, is likely to have a reputation for altruism among other people. However, with respect to the consistency of individual differences in altruistic behavior, numerous researchers have concluded that the altruistic personality does not appear to exist (Gergen, Gergen, & Meter, 1972; Krebs, 1978; Latane & Darley, 1970; Mussen & Eisenberg-Berg, 1977). In contrast, Rushton (1981) claims that there is an altruistic personality and that the altruistic person is someone who has adopted more lofty and more universal standards of justice and social responsibility and/or has developed a greater ability to empathize with the emotional and motivational perspective of others. As a result, the altruistic person is more likely to value, and, hence, to engage in, a variety of altruistic behaviors.

The Omnibus Personality Inventory (Heist & Yonge, 1968) contains a subscale

designed to measure individual differences in altruism. In agreement with the claim that there is an altruistic personality, it was hypothesized that helping in non-emergency situations would be positively related to the OPI measure of altruistic tendencies, while statistically controlling for individual differences in social desirability bias as measured by the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1964). Moreover, we suggest that the analysis of helping behavior in terms of rewards and costs may help to clarify the nature of the expected positive relationship between the personality measure of altruistic tendencies and willingness to help in non-emergency situations. At least two possibilities exist. On the one hand, persons who are high versus low in altruistic tendencies may evaluate the rewards and costs of helping situations in different ways. Rewards and costs are in the eye of the beholder (Walster & Piliavin, 1972); thus, highly altruistic persons may view the same situations as more rewarding and/or less costly than persons low in altruism. On the other hand, persons who vary in altruistic tendencies may perceive the rewards and costs of helping situations in a similar manner, but highly altruistic persons may be less affected by these variables than persons low in altruism; that is, highly altruistic persons may choose to help regardless of the level of rewards and costs, while persons low in altruism may help only under favorable circumstances (e.g., high rewards and low costs). In the present study, ratings of the perceived rewards and costs for helping in five non-emergency situations were collected to examine if persons who differ in altruistic tendencies vary in their perception of the costs and benefits of identical situations.

Method

One hundred thirty-two undergraduates participated in this experiment. Each student was paid two dollars in return for his/her assistance, and all responses in the experiment were anonymous.

The stimuli in this experiment consisted of descriptions of five situations in which a person asked for some type of help. These descriptions were developed in two

pilot studies. In the first pilot study, 44 undergraduates each described one situation from their own experience in which a person asked them for help. Ten of the resulting descriptions were selected and paraphrased to produce four versions of each situation. The versions were designed to differ in the costs (low versus high) and rewards (low versus high) associated with helping. In the second pilot study, the resulting situations were rated by 45 undergraduates to check the manipulation of rewards and costs. The five situations selected for further study were those for which both rewards and costs were manipulated successfully as indicated by a statistical analysis of the results of the second pilot study. For example, the following situation was rated as high in both rewards and costs:

> On your way to class one afternoon, a person asks you for directions to the Admissions Office. The person seems very friendly and likely to appreciate your assistance. You are already late for a class in which an examination is being given today.

A different version of the same situation was rated as low in both rewards and costs.

> On your way to class one afternoon, a person asks you for directions to the Admissions Office. The person seems very unfriendly and unlikely to appreciate your assistance. You are early for a class that usually does not begin on time anyway.

In the main experiment, each subject rated the five situations under <u>one</u> combination of rewards and costs. First, subjects indicated the amount of help (1 = no help at all; 7 = very much help) they would provide in each of the five situations. Then subjects rated the perceived rewards (1 = no rewards at all; 7 = very high rewards) and the perceived costs (1 = not costs at all; 7 = very high costs) of each situation. Finally, subjects completed the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale and three scales from the Omnibus Personality Inventory (complexity, social extroversion, and altruism).

Based on the altruism items and the reported correlations with other measures (Heist & Yonge, 1968), the high scorer on the altruism scale is someone who maintains a concern for the welfare of other people and is not oriented toward personal gains. In

addition, the high scorer tends to be other-oriented, outgoing, and generally at ease with people. Finally, the high scorer needs social involvement and possesses a willingness to guide and assist people in need. In contrast, the low scorer would prefer to use leisure time to develop a favorite skill rather than do volunteer work and would rather not have responsibility for other people.

Results

As a check on the manipulations, separate 2 X 2 X 5 (reward X cost X situation) analyses of variance were conducted on the ratings of perceived rewards and costs. High reward situations (M = 4.75) were rated as more rewarding than low reward situations (M = 3.63), F (1, 127) = 27.77, $p < .001$, and high cost situations (M = 4.06) were perceived to be more costly than low cost situations (M = 3.16), F (1, 127) = 24.20, $p < .001$. As in subsequent analyses, several significant effects involving situations were obtained; however, those effects do not alter the interpretation of the findings presented here.

To examine the major predictions, a 2 X 2 X 3 X 5 (reward X cost X altruism X situation) analysis of covariance was performed on the ratings of helping. Within each condition of the reward X cost manipulation, subjects were divided into three groups of 11 subjects based on their OPI altruism scores: high, moderate, and low. The covariate consisted of scores on the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale. Results indicated that high rewards (M = 5.52) led to more helping than low rewards (M = 3.63), F (1, 118) = 127.59, $p < .001$, and that low costs (M = 5.33) led to more helping than high costs (M = 4.03), F (1, 118) = 77.09, $p < .001$. In addition, there was a significant (F (2, 118) = 14.01, $p < .001$) positive relationship between the OPI measure of altruistic tendencies and helping: high altruism (M = 5.05), moderate altruism (M = 4.91), and low altruism (M = 4.10).

Identical 2 X 2 X 3 X 5 analyses of covariance were performed on the ratings of perceived rewards and costs. A significant (F (2, 118) = 9.24, $p < .001$) positive

relationship was found between the OPI measure of altruistic tendencies and perceived rewards: high altruism (M = 4.79), moderate altruism (M = 3.97), and low altruism (M = 3.78). Also, a significant (F (2, 118) = 5.09, $p < .01$) negative relationship was found between the measure of altruistic tendencies and perceived costs: high altruism (M = 3.31), moderate altruism (M = 3.37), and low altruism (M = 3.99).

Conclusions

In support of the hypotheses, helping in five non-emergency situations increased as the rewards for helping increased and as the costs for helping decreased. Also, helping was positively related to individual differences in altruism. In view of the fact that these relationships were obtained while statistically controlling for social desirability, the results cannot be discounted as an artifact of individual differences in approval motivation or as a form of response bias.

Perhaps most interesting, it was found that persons who vary in altruistic tendencies differ in their perception of the rewards and costs of the identical helping situations. Persons high in altruism view the same situations as more rewarding and as less costly than persons low in altruism. Thus, individual differences in helping behavior may reflect, in part, differences in the perception of social situations with respect to the costs and benefits of providing help. Presumably, the source of these differences would be the past experiences of the individual in helping situations. For example, in a recent study by Rittle (1981), college students who helped a child operate a candy machine later rated the act of offering help to another person as significantly less unpleasant than students who never helped. In addition, when subsequently asked for help by an adult, subjects who had previously helped volunteered significantly more time than did control subjects. In conclusion, we suggest that the altruistic person probably is <u>not</u> characterized by a profile of specific personality traits; rather, based on past experience, the altruistic person is an individual who consistently evaluates helping situations more favorably in terms of the potential rewards and costs of providing help.

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